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Development eats away at 'boonies'

GROWTH SITES: Change called 'inevitable' in Hardin Valley, other areas

By **DON JACOBS**, jacobs@knews.com
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Hardin Valley resident Glenn Stirling waved his hand toward the tree-covered ridge behind his house to show where homes from a planned subdivision will be perched.

The rumble of heavy equipment busily clearing property for a planned 350-lot subdivision hasn't yet intruded on the ridge. With the exception of a rare explosion to bust troublesome rock, the subtle sounds of lazily flowing water and dancing insects continue unabated on Stirling's property.



Conner Creek flows at the base of the hill behind Stirling's house as it wends toward the Clinch River. Stirling regularly sees turkey, deer, beaver and raccoon near the creek as the critters traverse his 10-acre lot off East Gallaher Ferry Road.

"That's all gone when this development goes in," the 47-year-old Stirling lamented.

"When I bought out here, I thought this was way out in the boonies. Boy, was I wrong. I'm on the front of a wave of development."

But that gathering wave of residential and commercial development has little to do with the proposed Knoxville Regional Parkway, say planners and developers. With only two interchanges along its 28-mile route, officials say there is little chance that the parkway will spur development but good reason to suspect the road will hinder progress.

"Long before the parkway comes through, we'll see the subdivision developments and the Bi-Lo's," Stirling said.

People who track development for a living agree with him.

"(The parkway) won't do anything to foster new growth because by the time it's finished, the area will already be developed," said Dale Akins, president of The Market Edge Inc., an informational service that tracks development in several states.

Mary Evans, associate professor of economics at the University of Tennessee, noted that the completed parkway, with few interchanges, will offer little allure to potential homebuyers.

"Because of the noise and pollution, those areas along the route without access to the road probably would suffer," Evans said.



J. MILES CARY / NEWS SENTINEL

Glenn Stirling leans on his woodpile on Gallaher Ferry Road. Stirling, who works in Oak Ridge, said that when he bought his property several years ago, "I thought this was way out in the boonies. Boy, was I wrong. I'm on the front of a wave of development." Stirling lives in Hardin Valley, the site of a proposed 350-lot subdivision.



AMY SMOTHERMAN-BURGESS / NEWS SENTINEL

Ed Campbell, left, and his brother Darby Campbell survey their family farm in West Knox County. The land is in the path of the proposed Knoxville Regional Parkway, also called the Orange Route and state Route 475.



JEFF ADKINS / NEWS SENTINEL

Craig Huber, who is developing a 350-lot subdivision near the proposed Knoxville Regional Parkway off Hickory Creek Road in Hardin Valley, is framed by large concrete blocks that are to be used in a drainage system. The parkway is a source of controversy, with opponents saying it is too close to the city to be

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The Knoxville Regional Parkway, also called the Orange Route and state Route 475, has been in the planning stages since 1997. Earlier this year, Tennessee Department of Transportation Commissioner Gerald Nicely decided to follow recommendations of a local design team about the parkway's profile.

Team members not only selected the route of the new road through West Knox County and eastern Anderson County, they also rejected nearly every proposed interchange along the route. Nicely endorsed the recommendation that the regional parkway have interchanges only at Clinton Highway and Pellissippi Parkway.

Nicely's decision effectively killed proposals to add interchanges at Everett Road, Marietta Church Road, Oak Ridge Highway and Raccoon Valley Road.

"Our intent for the parkway is for congestion mitigation," said Mike Russell, TDOT project manager for the parkway.

"Many times, on the heels of a new road comes economic development. But the design team wanted this to be a bypass."

TDOT supported the proposed parkway as a way to divert truck traffic from the downtown area by connecting Interstate 75 in Loudon County with I-75 in Anderson County near Wolf Valley Road.

State officials said property acquisition for the parkway could begin by 2008. Once launched, TDOT said construction will take 15-20 years and cost \$570 million.

Bulldozers away

With or without a parkway, development was bearing down on Hardin Valley, a pastoral area of land zoned mainly for farms and grazing fields.

"That area is one of the few areas in Knox County good for development," said Craig Huber, with Cornerstone Development Group. "It's an obvious direction of growth from West Knoxville."

And with sewer lines extended to accommodate the new Hardin Valley High School, Huber said the area should experience an avalanche of development. The new school, Huber said, is a strong selling point for homebuyers.

"I think it will be shocking how quickly that valley will be developed," Huber said. "By the time they get the road going in 10 years or so, the whole area will be developed."

Huber's company is doing its part to fulfill that prediction. Cornerstone Development is creating a 350-lot subdivision on 180 acres. The property formerly was the Christian Farm, which was bounded by Hickory Creek and Hardin Valley roads and straddled East Gallaher Ferry Road.

"Change is inevitable," Huber said. "There simply are a lot of people who want to live in Knox County, and we are meeting that demand."

And most of those people are trying to locate their homes in the northwest sector of the county. That sector last year recorded 955 residential building permits. Contrast that to the total of 958 permits for homes and businesses within the entire city of Knoxville in 2005, according to statistics compiled by the Metropolitan Planning Commission.

The northwest sector includes West Knox County between the city and the Clinch River and property north of Farragut from Interstate 40 to Clinton Highway.

Mike Banks, general manager of West Knox Utility District, which provides water and sewer services to the area, said his company isn't anticipating leaps in its customer base because of the parkway.

"With so few interchanges, we don't see much of an impact from the parkway," Banks said. "Had there been more, it could have potentially started new growth."

Not all Hardin Valley residents are happy with the booming development trend or the impending parkway.

Martha Arnett expects further disruption of the life she has built on 40 acres off East Gallaher Ferry Road.

Arnett said she already hears commercial trucks changing gears nearly four miles away on I-40/75. The parkway will slice through Hardin Valley within one-third of a mile from the land she has occupied for 20 years.

"I expect eight to 10 years of noise and bulldozers," Arnett said of the planned parkway. "It'll never be the same."

"It's not that we're against development. We just hoped it would be orderly and like mini-farms."

Instead, Arnett has resigned herself to a future of Hardin Valley under heavy development.

"It'll look like everything else, with subdivisions, stores and congestion," she said.

 ■ **Web site:** Knoxville Parkway
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Mike Carberry, manager of comprehensive planning with the MPC, supports Arnett's vision. Commercial enterprises will chase rooftops and wallets, he said.

"Development begets development," Carberry said. "As soon as you get enough buying power, commercial development will follow."

With the grueling life involved with agricultural endeavors, long-established families in Hardin Valley are ready to sell the home place.

"You can't farm land that's worth \$35,000-\$45,000 an acre; it's just not feasible," said Sharon Todd, a Claxton resident who served on the parkway design team.

And who else but developers, Huber said, have the financial means to buy 100 or more acres when a family opts to sell its land?

Dan Kelly, development services manager with MPC, said property in Hardin Valley is fetching \$30,000-\$76,000 per acre.

"When someone comes by and waves that kind of money in front of you and you've been barely eking out a living by farming, it's hard for the heirs to refuse," Kelly said.

Arnett's vision of mini-farms throughout the valley defies current market trends, said Mark Donaldson, executive director of the MPC.

"The market is going in a different direction," Donaldson said. "People don't want to take care of five acres."

Huber closely followed the parkway planning because the route will skirt his Covered Bridge development off East Gallaher Ferry Road. His subdivision plan went before the MPC nearly a year before Nicely announced final plans for the parkway.

One of the proposed interchanges would have included property containing his subdivision.

"We would have been OK if an interchange had gone in there because all of a sudden, we would have had commercial property," Huber said.

Without an interchange at Hardin Valley and Hickory Creek roads, Huber was left with a subdivision within 1,000 feet of the new road.

"It may actually hinder development," he said of the parkway.

Huber faces the prospect of selling lots to buyers who eventually will see the parkway from their back yard. Combined with the noise of a four-lane, divided highway and pollution concerns, Huber is no fan of the project.

"I'd rather not see it because it's not good for the community," he said. "It's going to divide some very fine properties that were ripe for development."

Frozen assets

Ed and Darby Campbell have already watched millions of dollars slip through their fingers because of the parkway.

Thirty-five years ago their father bought 350 acres in Solway as an investment, Darby Campbell said. With property values jumping in recent years from \$20,000-\$50,000 an acre, it appears their father had an eye for profit.

The Campbell family has already sold 50 acres, upon which sits Pellissippi State Community College.

But a potential sale to a developer for the rest of the property fell through, the 54-year-old Ed Campbell said, because of the specter of the Orange Route.

"We're all in the middle of this Orange Route," Darby Campbell, 45, said.

Since they've been developing property for decades, the Campbells went to the MPC with plans for two subdivisions on their land. Although both proposed subdivisions lie within the path of the parkway, the MPC approved the projects.

"The situation we're facing with the parkway is that it's time-wise pretty far out," said Kelly, the development services manager with the MPC.

"The planning commission's position has been that if we knew something definitive - time-wise - then we could address the parkway construction issue."

With that logic, the MPC has approved three subdivisions that lie in the path of the parkway.

And TDOT isn't especially happy with those decisions.

"We could only hope that the (Knoxville Regional) Transportation Planning Organization would sit down with them and explain why that is not a good idea," said TDOT project manager Russell.

When TDOT begins buying property for the parkway, land already rezoned and platted for a subdivision will cost taxpayers much more than horse-grazing fields, Russell said.

Kelly conceded a subdivision in the path of the parkway "either drives up the cost of the road or forces planners to reroute it."

Now the Campbells have approval for a 140-acre subdivision along Sam Lee Road with 296 lots and a 26-acre development for 75 homes at Oak Ridge Highway and West Emory Road.

"Right now, we're really bumfuzzled about what to do," Darby Campbell said. "No buyer is going to buy a house next to the parkway, so I'm kind of stuck right now. We're in a waiting pattern."

Campbell said his family already has spent more than \$500,000 preparing the properties with roads and sewer service. For now, however, the projects are on hold.

"This road is a truck road," Campbell said. "It won't be like Pellissippi Parkway, a nice scenic road. And nobody will want to live next to a road with trucks blasting by."

Campbell said he suspects the parkway will devalue residential property along its route. And what would have been sprawling subdivisions covering a hundred or more acres will become scattered enclaves of houses, he said.

The Campbells hope to recover their residential losses through commercial development. Their land is so close to Pellissippi Parkway they may reap the benefits of commercial developments or even apartment complexes near the intersection of the Knoxville Regional Parkway and Pellissippi Parkway.

"Any development or accurate planning is now out of the question for the foreseeable future," Ed Campbell said. "We pulled a 300-plus unit development off the table specifically because of the Orange Route."

And Ed Campbell wonders how much tax revenue Knox County will lose because of the parkway.

TDOT figures show the parkway will consume 118 residences, 17 businesses and 1,708 acres of right of way. TDOT estimates it will cost nearly \$52 million just to buy property for the route. Combine that with the devaluation of property along the 28-mile route, and Ed Campbell suspects the county will lose millions of dollars annually in property tax receipts.

"It's lost revenue that we'll never see," he said.

Neither TDOT nor the MPC has compiled a costs/benefit analysis of the parkway.

"We estimate the loss of 100-150 acres of prime commercial property at the Solway intersection," said Donaldson, the MPC executive director.

Ed Campbell has an even bigger fear regarding the parkway.

"My concern is that they're going to kill any development for the next 10-15 years and then decide that it's too expensive and they're not going to build it," he said.

Anderson County leg

For economic development, parkway planners couldn't have selected a worse place to locate the interchange in Anderson County.

As a general rule, interchanges on a major road are a guarantee of commercial development. But the interchange with Clinton Highway is in an area so steep and rocky it has defied commercial development. The main problem is sewer service.

"Electrical systems don't usually hold back development; it's sewer," said MPC's Carberry. "And putting sewer lines through rock is difficult."

Plans call for the parkway to intersect with Clinton Highway at Strader Road. Sewer service is sparse in that area.

"I don't expect to see a Weigels, Wendy's or Taco Bell on every corner," said Claxton resident Sharon Todd, who owns property near the planned interchange.

Todd represented the Claxton community as a member of the citizens design team for the parkway. She also works for a title search company, so she's familiar with development trends.

"I think initially it (the parkway) will hurt development and drive prices down," Todd said. "I don't think the development will come in my lifetime."

Marvin Hammond, president of Hallsdale-Powell Utility District, which serves the Knox and Anderson counties area impacted by the parkway, agreed with Todd.

"I just don't think it will be a dramatic impact because of our topography," Hammond said. "I look for this as a stimulus for the area, just not in my lifetime."

Steep slopes around the planned interchange mandate expensive pumping stations for sewer systems, he said. Those stations, Hammond said, can cost "several million dollars."

"It'll take a big investment from developers if they're interested in building out there," he said.

For Hammond, an interchange at Raccoon Valley Road would have been perfect for explosive development. He said for the past four years that area has been the target of a \$150 million upgrade in sewer lines and treatment facilities.

"From a utility standpoint, it would have been a lot simpler if the interchange had gone in at Raccoon Valley Road," he said. "We already have a sewer collection system in place there."

According to MPC's Carberry, MPC planners asked the design team to include an interchange at Raccoon Valley Road. The interchange, Carberry said, would have been helpful in locating a business park in Heiskell.

Heiskell resident David Elam had lobbied the design team for an interchange at Raccoon Valley Road to jump-start development in the area. He and his sisters own 70 acres that will be slashed in half by the parkway, and one sister will lose her house to the project.

"It would have presented a chance for some well-thought-out development," he said

Instead, the 57-year-old Elam said, Heiskell "has been forgotten."

"I think it's going to hurt the community more than anything," Elam said. "It's just going to be a highway coming through."

Anderson County Mayor Rex Lynch said an interchange at Raccoon Valley Road is essential to any economic impact from the parkway. The proposed interchange would have been in Knox County but within a mile of the Anderson County line.

"If those people are driving through our county, we need to figure out a way to get them into our businesses," Lynch said.

And Lynch said Anderson County officials "are not going to give up" on trying to convince TDOT to add a Raccoon Valley Road interchange.

Loudon development

Developer Doug Horne spent millions of dollars lining up property in Loudon County in anticipation of an economic boon courtesy of an interchange off the parkway at Hickory Creek Road.

The interchange would funnel vehicles to an emerging commercial development along five miles of Hickory Creek Road that would rival the Turkey Creek business bonanza. The Hickory Creek development would span from Watt Road to U.S. Highway 321.

But the parkway design team refused Horne's request for the interchange.

"I think the state's concern was traffic flow, not economic development," Horne said of the rejected interchange at Hickory Creek Road. "We tried to work around it so state Route 475 wouldn't be a hindrance to our project."

Horne said in recent years he has accumulated 250 acres along Hickory Creek Road in Loudon County and he's seeking more.

"We know it's going to be a major development area for the next 20-25 years," he said.

After being rejected for a parkway interchange, Horne shifted his focus to I-40 in Loudon County.

"We're talking to the state about an interchange on I-40 near Buttermilk Road and maybe run a road to Hickory Creek," Horne said. "If we don't get the interchange off I-40, then that will hurt Loudon County and state revenues."

"We may have to pay for part of it, as well as Loudon County, but Loudon County is committed to it."

Outgoing Loudon County Mayor George M. Miller said widening Hickory Creek Road, which Horne also requested, is a priority project for the county.

"It's likely the county would support any effort to attract development," Miller said.

Loudon County has paid for I-40 interchanges in the past. Miller said the county used hotel taxes to foot the bill for the Sugar Limb Road and Philadelphia interchanges.

Paul Degges, chief engineer with TDOT, said Horne approached the state last year about an I-40 interchange at Buttermilk Road.

"It is a routine occurrence for local governments, developers and hospitals to come to TDOT for an interchange," Degges said. "Some get it; some do not."

The minimum cost of an interchange, Degges said, is "\$8 million just to get your foot in the door." Costs then move upward depending on the local topography and relocation of utilities.

The concept remains in the talking stage, Degges said, and an interchange justification study has not been launched. The process would include public hearings and environmental studies.

That means the interchange would be years away, Degges said.

And Horne's requested Buttermilk Road interchange could violate a recommendation from the parkway design team. The team asked that no interchanges be added to I-40 or I-75 within two miles of where those roads meet the parkway.

Adding interchanges

TDOT Commissioner Nicely will face a fusillade of pressure from developers, government representatives and politicians to add interchanges to the parkway to yield economic benefits.

"I think interchanges are coming," said state Sen. Tim Burchett, R-Knoxville. "Influential people will get the interchanges; that's the way it works.

"Politicians are always looking for easy money, and tax money from development are the easiest dollars."

Burchett fought against the parkway on the basis it is designed too close to Knoxville to be an effective bypass. He favored a more westerly route through Roane and Anderson counties.

"I think if you take a picture of the asphalt when it's finished and then another aerial picture 10 years later, it'll look like Kingston Pike," he said.

Akins, The Market Edge president, said he would like to see multiple interchanges added to the parkway before construction begins.

"As we're seeing with I-40 now, it's a lot more expensive to add things to a road that's in an already developed area," Akins said. "It will help any area that has an interchange."

Akins also favors shifting the parkway farther west.

"I thought we had a vision," Akins said, referring to the Nine Counties. One Vision. organization that was created years ago to support regional efforts.

"Shifting it a lot farther west would make Morgan County a bedroom community," he said.

Greg Fay, general manager of Clinton Utilities who served on the parkway design team as a representative for the East Tennessee Economic Development Agency, is confident the Orange Route will sport more interchanges.

"I have no doubt that this road will change as the needs change," Fay said. "But you can't add an interchange to a parkway that's not there."

Overall, Fay said, the parkway will be an economic boon to the region and provide ease of movement through the area.

"Our growth and job opportunities are tied together," he said. "If you're not growing, you're diminishing."

Allen Neel, president and CEO of the ETEDA, said the parkway is an essential part of a beltway that eventually will connect to I-40 or Interstate 81 east of Knoxville. The ETEDA works with area chambers of commerce to recruit businesses to 16 counties in the region.

"From a regional perspective, having the parkway is critical to the development of the area for access," Neel said. The route, he said, will relieve traffic congestion and allow better movement of goods through the region.

Without more interchanges, planners fear the parkway will become the new western boundary of Knox County, cutting off communities and hindering development. Hardin Valley especially would benefit from an interchange, said MPC's Donaldson.

"You could argue that an interchange out there would have helped us to formulate a commercial development plan," Donaldson said.

Without interchanges, Donaldson said, the parkway "could cut off the part of the county north of the parkway from development."

TDOT statistics show 10 communities will be divided by the parkway. But TDOT officials say they are committed to maintaining vehicular access across the route and will improve many county roads to keep communities connected.

"The parkway could become the boundary of what is rural and what is not," Donaldson said.

Don Jacobs may be reached at 865-342-6345.



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